

Democrats Should Embrace Impeachment; Op-Ed Columnist

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Highlight: A progressive megadonor wants more politicians to try to remove President Trump from office.

Body

Last week, Tom Steyer, the billionaire progressive donor, announced a \$10 million campaign calling for President Trump's impeachment, beginning with a television commercial running in all 50 states. Trump, the spot says, has "brought us to the brink of nuclear war, obstructed justice at the F.B.I., and in direct violation of the Constitution, he's taken money from foreign governments and threatened to shut down news organizations that report the truth." Appearing on screen, Steyer asks, "If that isn't a case for impeaching and removing a dangerous president, then what has our government become?"

It's a good question. Yet while most elected Democrats probably agree that Trump's presidency is a nightmare, they've been largely reluctant to use the "I" word. The base wants impeachment — according to an August survey from the Public Religion Research Institute, 72 percent of Democrats support efforts to remove Trump from office. But inside the Beltway, calling for impeachment remains strangely taboo.

Some members of Congress are awaiting the results of the investigation being conducted by Robert Mueller, the special counsel, and the case for impeachment may become stronger when his inquiry is complete. Yet whatever Mueller discovers, we have credible reasons for impeachment right now. The Constitution dictates that presidents be impeached for "treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

But as the Harvard Law scholar Cass Sunstein, author of the recent book "Impeachment: A Citizen's Guide," told me, that doesn't mean Congress can impeach only a president who is caught breaking the law. "Crime is neither necessary nor sufficient," said Sunstein, who emphasizes that his book is not about Trump. "If the president went on vacation in Madagascar for six months, that's not a crime, but that's impeachable."

Trump, alas, has not decamped to Madagascar. But legal scholars have laid out cases for impeachment based on Trump's blatant violations of the Constitution's emoluments clause; his abuse of power in pardoning the former Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio; and for passing Israeli intelligence to Russian officials, among other misdeeds. In July, Representative Brad Sherman, a California Democrat, introduced an article of impeachment on the grounds that Trump attempted to obstruct justice by firing James Comey from the F.B.I. Yet he had only a single co-sponsor, Al Green, a Texas Democrat who first called for Trump's impeachment in May.

Steyer, a hedge fund manager-turned-environmentalist who spent more than \$91 million on behalf of Democrats in 2016, finds this reticence baffling. "What is the calculus to being silent on the most important issue of the day, where it's absolutely critical to the American people, and it will go on the historical record of what you did or didn't do?" he asked me. "I don't understand."

I've spoken to Democrats who fear making impeachment too partisan, holding out hope that if Trump's behavior becomes egregious enough Republicans might join the effort to hold him accountable. Others, Sherman told me,

say, “We don’t want to distract from health care, and from our economic plan.” And, of course, some on the left believe that a functioning Mike Pence administration would be worse than the dysfunctional Trump regime.

There are strategic merits to all these arguments. But they leave many Americans terrified by Trump’s erratic behavior and incompetence feeling marooned, confused as to why their leaders aren’t treating this presidency like the civic emergency that it is. At some point, we need politicians to address the crisis in front of us. “We have a democracy to protect and a republic to save, and that’s what this is all about,” Green told me.

Obviously, no matter how grave the threat, a Republican-controlled Congress has little incentive to act. But even if Democrats retake the House in 2018, Sherman told me, impeachment “would still require a change in public opinion.”

This is why Steyer’s campaign is potentially useful, even if at first glance it seems quixotic. Sure, it’s hard to imagine anyone who doesn’t already despise the president being convinced by the earnest plea of a filthy-rich California climate activist. But Steyer is aiming at movement-building; he wants to reach people who desperately want Trump gone but don’t know what to do about it. “We’re asking electeds to stand up for the right thing, but we’re going to American citizens to ask them to demand it,” he said.

Some commentators fear “normalizing” impeachment as a tool of routine political warfare. But Bill Clinton’s impeachment already normalized its use against Democrats on the flimsiest of pretexts. Had Hillary Clinton been elected, the campaign to remove her would probably be in full swing by now. Democrats may wish to return to a less destructive brand of politics, but that’s not an option while Trump sits in the White House.

While he does, we’re all better off if he thinks impeachment is a possibility. “I’m hoping that if Trump is aware that he could be removed, that that awareness constrains him to the extent he can be constrained,” Sherman said. And the best way to show Trump that people are serious about impeaching him is to put the message on television.

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